

Genetic Linguistics

Essays on Theory and Method

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Does Altaic exist?*

Since the writings of Clauson, and more recently Doerfer, it appears that most specialists in the Altaic languages no longer believe that the three groups of traditional Altaic, namely Turkic, Mongolian, and Tungusic, are related; their resemblances are to be attributed to borrowing, or in some cases to accident or sound symbolism.

The term ‘traditional Altaic’ is here used purposely, that is, without reference to Korean, Japanese, or for that matter Uralic.¹ This is not because I believe that the Altaic languages are genetically isolated. In fact, in my view (Greenberg 1987: 332), they belong to a much larger grouping, Eurasiatic, along with other languages besides those just mentioned above. Moreover, considerations deriving from these wider connections will figure in some instances in an essential way in the following discussion.

There are two separate questions involved here. Are the Altaic languages related to each other? If they are, do they constitute a valid genetic grouping, that is, a set of languages which have a single exclusive common ancestor, Proto-Altaic, which gave rise to three groups of languages and no others?

I believe that the answer to the first question, that of mere relationship, is overwhelmingly positive. That to the second is more difficult, but on the balance I rather strongly endorse a positive answer here also.

Recently in several publications, Miller (1991*a*, 1991*b*) has defended the traditional view. His arguments are largely phonological, especially the existence of two reconstructed pairs of liquid phonemes l_1 , l_2 , r_1 , and r_2 , which within Altaic are only distinguished in non-Chuvash Turkic. Miller believes that l_1 and l_2 have separate reflexes in Japanese. There are also instances in which Turkic merges a number of phonemes in j , namely d , j , n , and n^y .

* Irén Hegedus, Peter A. Michalove and Alexis Manaster Ramer (ed.), *Indo-European, Nostratic and Beyond: a Festschrift for Vitaly V. Shevoroshkin*. Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of Man, 1997, 88–93.

¹ It seems clear to me that languages like Korean, Japanese, and Uralic stand apart from traditional Altaic. Thus, Poppe (1960: 8), who includes Korean, shows it as a separate branch from the rest of Altaic, and it figures comparatively infrequently in his etymologies.

In such instances in order to account for the usual anti-Altaicist scenario in terms of borrowing from Turkic into Mongolian (with some reverse borrowing) and then from Mongolian into Tungusic, the borrowing has to be pushed back to a time so early that it becomes indistinguishable from Proto-Altaic, that is, when Turkish still distinguished *d*, *j*, *n*, and *n'*, and all the Altaic languages outside of non-Chuvash Turkic displayed a difference between *l*₁ and *l*₂ as well as *r*₁ and *r*₂. At such a time the languages would all have had a sound system which is identical with that reconstructed by Ramstedt, Poppe, and others for Proto-Altaic.

Miller also alludes to the cogency of the grammatical data regarding verb derivation in Ramstedt (1912) and Poppe (1973). I agree with him on all of this, but I believe that he has omitted the most powerful evidence of all, that based on personal, demonstrative, and interrogative pronouns.

This material is, of course, familiar, but the anti-Altaicists have, as will be shown, carefully avoided presenting it in a coherent way, and where they have, have sought to explain it away in an unconvincing fashion as the result of factors other than common genetic inheritance.

I will begin with the first and second person pronouns. In the first person singular in non-Chuvash Turkic, some languages, e.g. Osmanli Turkish, have nominative singular *ben* and a stem *ben-* which, except for an internal variation in the dative (*bana*), is found in all the oblique cases. Most Turkic languages, however, have *men* rather than *ben*, and all have *-m* as the first person singular marker in verb forms. The fundamental form then is *me-n*, in which *-n* (often called pronominal *n* by Altaicists) has as its original function a mark of the oblique, ultimately of genitive origin. In non-Chuvash Turkic, this *-n* has spread analogically to the nominative. In Chuvash, however, which represents a separate branch of Turkic, this did not occur. The nominative here is *e-pe** in which *e* is a deictic element, and the oblique stem is *man-*.

This irregular alternation between nominative and oblique recurs in Mongolian in which the nominative is *bi* and the genitive *min-u* and Tungusic, e.g. Evenki, with nominative *bi* and genitive *min-i*. The forms *men* and *min* are much more widespread than Altaic, including Uralic (e.g. Finnish *minä* 'I') and Indo-European. Indo-European appears here as an important link in this chain. On the basis of Baltic, Slavic, and Indo-Iranian, Szemerényi (1970: 197) reconstructs **mene* for the genitive. In Baltic and Slavic, the form in *-n* has been extended to all the oblique cases as in Altaic.

The Indo-European evidence is important because it provides a confirming instance for the oblique case function of the form in *-n*. This is

presumably the same *-n* which occurs in the oblique cases of *r/n* stems.² The Indo-European independent nominative is a suppletive form but different from that of Altaic, namely *e-g(h)o-m*, whose most closely related form in Eurasiatic is Chukchee *i-gəm/e-gəm* (vowel-harmony variants) 'I' (cf. *i-gət/e-gət* 'thou'. Forms without the initial vowel occur as bound objects).

Returning to Altaic, it is clear that the probability of an irregular alternation such as *bi/men* occurring three times by accident is infinitesimal. That it should be borrowed twice is also utterly improbable. One has literally to scour the earth to find a few instances of a borrowed pronoun, much less an entire irregular alternation in pronouns. By itself it is enough to show that the Altaic languages are related, moreover the specific innovation of *bi* in the nominative is confined to these languages. Therefore it can be considered a shared common innovation within Eurasiatic that contributes to the establishment of traditional Altaic as a valid genetic entity.

How is this evidence treated by Clauson and Doerfer, the two leading exponents of the anti-Altaicist position? It is ignored where possible. In Clauson (1969: 38), which applies glottochronology to the Altaic problem, discussion is unavoidable since 'I' is part of the glottochronological list. He seeks to argue away the threefold resemblances, indicated by italicized entries, among Old Turkish, Old Mongolian, and Manchu, the three languages he utilizes in his study as follows:

It is known (but has not been explained up to now) that there are phonetic resemblances between personal pronouns in languages which are completely unconnected with each other, e.g. between *mine*, German *mein* and the Turkish genitive *menin* (from *ben*) and Mongolian *minö* [sic!] from *bü*; between Latin *tu* and Mongolian *či* (**ti*). The phonetic resemblances between Turkish, Mongolian, and Tungus-Manchurian in regard to these lexical items cannot be therefore recognized as probative.

This reasoning, which is very common, is to deny the significance of a resemblance because it is found somewhere else. This was used by Michelson against Sapir in regard to *n* first person, *m* second person in Algic because it occurs in so many other Amerind languages. It would be just as logical to deny the significance of the resemblance between English *mine* and German *mein* because it also occurs in Mongolian. One has to pursue the full

² The oblique *-n*, and indeed all the grammatical elements here were discovered by the Nostraticists. See especially the tables in Illich-Svitych (1971: 6–18). I discovered these independently at a time when I was not aware of Nostratic. In some instances, of course, I have found additional support, especially in languages not included in 'classical Nostratic' but often accepted now as Nostratic, e.g. Chukchi-Kamchatkan and Eskimo-Aleut.

distribution of these forms. As soon as one gets to Sino-Tibetan or Nilo-Saharan, or many others, it ceases. Both the Nostraticists and I include Indo-European and Altaic in the same group.

In addition, Clauson, by simply using the nominative as the translation form for the glottochronological list, fails to consider the agreement between Mongolian and Tungusic in the *bi/min-* alternation, and by not including Chuvash does not have to account for the threefold agreement in an irregularity among the three branches of Altaic.

And what of the second person singular pronouns? They are not discussed at all. Clauson unaccountably does not italicize Old Turkish *sen* and Manchu *si* as resemblances to be explained, or rather explained away, in spite of their complete parallelism with Old Turkish *ben* and Manchu *bi*. Old Mongolian *tere*, Manchu *tere* 'this' are italicized but passed over without comment.

Doerfer in general fails to discuss grammatical resemblances, but in his *Mongolo-Tungusica* (1985: 2), he says the following about the first person singular pronoun:

Indeed, even such an apparently clear comparison as Mongolian *bi*—Tungus *bi* is not convincing on closer examination, since the Mongolian forms (on account of the plural *bi-da*, cf. *e-de* 'these', *te-de* 'those') goes back to *bɪ*. A typical case of sound symbolism (*Elementarverwandschaft*), surface resemblance, but without the possibility of a connection by sound correspondence.

What Doerfer is saying is that Mongolian *i*, which has two sources in a system of back-front vowel harmony, must derive from a high *back* vowel, not a high front vowel, because of the vowel of the second syllable *-da* which is a back vowel.

What Doerfer fails to point out is that Mongolian *bida* is a first person inclusive plural. Now it is a worldwide typological fact that where there is a first person inclusive/exclusive distinction in the plural, the exclusive, when analyzable, is the plural of the first person. This is so in Mongolian, in which the first person is *ba*, with a perfect parallelism between the first and second persons, *bi:ba* = *či* < **ti:ta*.

On the other hand the first person inclusive is either a separate form unlike either the first or second person singular, or it is a combination of the two like Tok Pisin *yu-mi*. Hence *bi-da* is very likely a compound of singular *bi* with *ta* second plural. In compounds vowel harmony need not apply. A parallel situation is found in Tungusic, in which most languages have a first person plural inclusive/exclusive distinction in which the exclusive is the plural of the singular. The same parallelism reigns here as in Mongolian between the

first person and the second person, e.g. Evenki *bi:bu* = *si:su*. The first inclusive is here even more obviously a compound, e.g. Evenki *mi-ti*, *mi-t* (Tsintsius 1949: 270–1).

Note also that Doerfer fails to mention the striking parallelism between the nominative and oblique stems in the first person among Mongolian, Tungusic, and Chuvash. We are to believe that Mongolian *bi* here is not cognate with the Tungusic and Turkic forms in spite of the agreement between them in parallel irregularities. Characteristic also is Doerfer's resort to sound symbolism. This is done without any supporting evidence. Surely *b-* is not particularly frequent as a first person singular in languages of the world, nor is there any plausible support in sound imitation or other sources of *Elementarverwandschaft*.

Finally, it should be noted that violations of back-front vowel harmony are not uncommon in Uralic, a universally accepted family, and in etymologies which are obviously valid on other grounds. As late as 1910, Szinnyei, in his reconstruction of Proto-Finno-Ugric, resorted to a kind of majority rule to determine whether back or front vocalism was the original type in Proto-Finno-Ugric. Even now there are uncertain instances. A parallel situation exists in Turkic. As noted by Radloff (1882: 84) there are variations in stem vowels without any demonstrable cause. In fact there is an article by Dmitrijev on this topic, in which he observes that sporadic alternations in the same root of vowels of the front and back series is frequent in individual Turkic languages (Dmitrijev 1955: 115).

Another one of the very few grammatical etymologies in Doerfer (1985: 27) is his no. 66, the interrogative stem *ya-* of Mongolian and Tungus. He admits that it 'behaves like a genetically related word'. Once more he resorts to 'sound symbolism' and again his only support is Indo-European **jo*. But this is a widespread Eurasiatic interrogative (cf. Greenberg 1990). Once more we have the *ad hoc* resort to a highly implausible sound symbolic argument without any serious documentation.

Finally, what of the second person pronouns? They are passed over in complete silence. Doerfer, like Clauson, believes that Mongolian borrowed massively from Turkic, and then Tungusic from Mongol. He is clearly disturbed by the existence of certain etymologies common to Turkic and Tungusic and devotes a section to them (1985: 238–41), but he fails to mention the most glaring instance of all, the agreement of Turkic and Tungusic in an *s* second person as against Mongol *t*. Of course, if I am right in my discussion of the Mongol and Tungusic first person inclusive pronoun, *t* would also occur in Tungusic, but in a quite different context. Both *s* and *t* are widespread second person Eurasiatic pronouns. For example, we find Indo-European

t in the independent pronoun and plural verb endings and *s* as a singular verb suffix.

In general there are a considerable number of other grammatical markers common to all the Altaic branches, most of them entirely ignored by Doerfer. However, virtually all these are found in other branches of Eurasiatic. The number of these as well as the lexical evidence makes the relationship of the Altaic languages a certainty. However, the distinctness of Altaic as a valid subgroup, which is most conspicuously supported by the *bi/min* alternation in the first person singular pronoun requires further assessment, a task not undertaken here.

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